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Out of the Attic

At GW High School, some California dreamin'

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Image: Ellen Naomi Cohen, known as Mama Cass Elliot. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

Another of the legendary musical performers that attended George Washington High School in Alexandria's Del Ray neighborhood was Ellen Naomi Cohen, who became known the world over as Mama Cass Elliot. Cohen was born in Baltimore in 1941 to the children of Russian immigrants. The family moved to Alexandria in her childhood and rented an apartment at 1502 Commonwealth Ave.

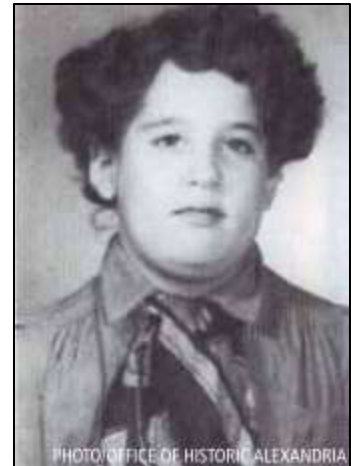
Cohen did her best to fit in at GW, and adopted the nickname "Cass" possibly after the well-known comedian of the time, Peggy Cass. At the school she became interested in the performing arts and during the summer of her senior year she was cast in a production of the comedic farce, "The Boy Friend" at the Owings Mills Playhouse in Maryland. There she played the minor role of a French nurse, but her vocal talents lifted the production immensely with her solo rendition of "It's nicer, much nicer, in Nice."

Cass left high school before graduation in 1961 and moved to New York where she assumed the stage name Elliot in memory of a recently departed friend. She worked at The Showplace nightclub in Greenwich Village as a singing coat check attendant, and could often be found performing at late-night "open mike" at area bars. In 1962, after losing out to Barbra Streisand for a part in the Broadway production of "I Can Get it for You Wholesale," she returned to the Washington area to attend American University.

Once back in D.C., she formed a trio with singers Tim Rose and John Brown called "The Triumvirate" and became accomplished in both popular and country musical genres and the emerging trend of folk music. During this time she also produced an off-Broadway play at New York's Café La Mama, which may have influenced her future nickname.

By 1963, John Brown left the group and was replaced by James Hendricks. The trio was renamed "The Big Three" often billed as featuring "Mama Cass Elliot," and later that year Elliot actually married Hendricks to prevent his being drafted into the Vietnam War. A year later, Rose left the group and two new members, Zal Yanovsky and Denny Doherty, joined to form a quartet with the name "The Mugwumps."

But in the quickly shifting world of musical evolution during the mid-1960s, the group split after only eight months, even before their first album was cut. Hendricks moved to Los Angeles, Yanovsky joined with John Sebastian to form "The Lovin' Spoonful" and Doherty joined "The New Journeymen," a West Coast musical group that included Alexandria's own John Phillips, himself a GW graduate from 1951.





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Although Phillips had met Elliot in New York several years earlier, they did not overlap at their mutual hometown high school, and it was Doherty who convinced Phillips and his new wife, Michelle, to have Elliot join the group. Known informally in the music world simply as Mama Cass due to her large size and commanding voice, it was Elliot who ultimately suggested the new group be called "The Mamas and the Papas." Within months the new quartet was soon catapulted to superstar status in the "Flower Power" movement, with hit after hit playing worldwide.

Cass Elliot sang with the Phillips group until their final album in 1971, but often played solo venues in the years before. She had a spectacular flame-out in Las Vegas in 1968 after a throat illness and her first case of solo jitters caused her voice to break during two concerts on the same evening, but she apologized to the audience and recovered her singing reputation soon after. By 1974, she was at the height of her solo career and in July she performed to sold-out audiences at London's Palladium. But tragically, on the night of July 28, she died in London of a heart attack in her sleep at the borrowed Mayfair flat of songwriter Harry Nilsson. She was just 32 years old.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.